

Create Streets Essay

August 2024



Nicholas Boys Smith
Tom Noble

The Joy of Streets

How can we create great streets?



The Joy of Streets


How can we create great streets?

Street, block, plot. As any new urbanist will tell you, these are the building blocks, the Lego bricks, of the traditional city. They are our starting point for creating streets, squares, and settlements. Across culture, climate and the centuries, this pattern repeats from ancient Mohenjo-daro to Victorian Manchester and from Barcelona to Beijing. This disparate but parallel evolution is a text book example of convergent evolution of a successful solution to a practical problem. Similarly, the eye of any octopus and any mammal have fundamental similarities even though we diverged on the evolutionary tree of life aeons before any eyes started to evolve. This is natural selection of the urban form. What works repeats and survives. What does not work, dies.



Above - Yazd and Pompeii. Ancient places, timeless patterns. [1]

¹Yardımlı, Seyhan & Gulec Ozer, Derya & Shahriary, Amin. (2020). Sustainable street architecture and its effects on human comfort conditions: Yazd, Iran



A tissue of streets and plots work as they meet our human and communal needs to get about efficiently from any 'A' to any 'B' whilst simultaneously readily creating a myriad of plots in which we can swiftly move from the private to the public and back again. They allow the personal and public to converge physically but nevertheless to remain apart. Streets with a pattern of plots also encourage the variety in a pattern which most of us find beautiful. Of course, encouraged by the invention of the motor-car (and funded by their manufacturers) and understandably scarred by the shattering experience of world war, twentieth century traffic-modernists attempted a new approach. Le Corbusier wrote that 'the street is disgusting, why therefore do we not destroy it?' Twentieth century traffic-modernist town planning sought to cure the chaos of the street, impose rationality from on high and decouple the street's many functions by splitting the city into separate large zones for living, working or relaxing. Instead of a city of walkable Lego streets, a city of large blocks of Duplo. As is now widely recognised, the results have been catastrophic for the wellbeing of our fellow citizens and the weight with which we all tread upon the planet. This twentieth century experiment will become, we believe, an evolutionary dead end, or cul-de-sac, though many mayors, politicians, highways engineers and architects continue to create or defend elements of this model.

What Works ?

At the London-based social enterprise, Create Streets, we research what streets people actually like and why. In our book, *Of Streets and Squares*, based on hundreds of existing studies and our own primary analysis we suggested seven golden rules for prosperous and popular places.



• **Create 'gentle density'**, the sweet spot between towers and sprawl, providing an ideal balance between privacy and proximity. This Goldilocks urbanism is incredibly efficient. As a rule of thumb, this requires a density of greater than 50, but less than 200, homes per hectare and a building height of between three and seven stories.

• **Enclosure matters**, up to a point. We can be a little agoraphobic, people generally like streets that are somewhat cosy with a good sense of enclosure. The magic number here is a ratio of street width to building height of between 0.5 and 1.5. There are exceptions, and climate changes the trade-off. Trees are a good way of providing extra enclosure on very wide streets.

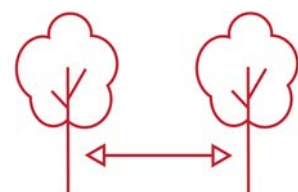
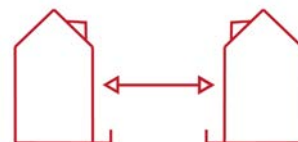
• **Greenery little and often**. It is not just green spaces that we need in cities. While being in a park is great, we actually spend surprisingly little time in them and will not walk to them if they're more than a few minutes away. To get all the benefits of greenery we need to be exposed to it in our daily lives, walking to the shops or looking out of our window.

• **Beauty really matters**. Streets should rhyme, they should have pattern but variety. Fine grained streets with narrow plots, are wonderful and creating the sort of coherent complexity that people find beautiful. Beauty is not all in the eye of the beholder and is fairly predictable and much attention should be given to the composition, materials, colours, and details of facades.

• **Mix it up**. This doesn't just mean uses, we need a mix of typologies, of styles and street types from alleyways to high streets to city boulevards. A variety of active uses on the ground floor, particularly when there are short frontages, and a mix of styles also makes for a more interesting street. For new streets, allowing a variety of building designs through self-build and custom build will help. New streets should be underpinned by a design code or pattern book.

• **Edges matter**. We like streets and squares that make us feel safer and protected. This means wide, comfortable pavements, places to sit positioned on the edge of public spaces, and well-defined boundaries.

• **Clear fronts and backs**. This is one of the simplest and most necessary characteristics yet it is often not achieved on new developments. Front doors to homes and shops should be facing the street, private spaces should be clearly delineated.





Above - a historic street in Fulbeck, Lincolnshire

Below - A new street in Derwenthorpe, York







Above - Create Streets work applied in a vision and master-plan for Sandycote, Devon

Below - A new street in Poundbury, Dorset



Theory Into Practice

How, practically, can we design or code for such places? Create Streets is not just a think tank. We are also a design practice and town-builder supporting neighbourhood groups, landowners and councils to create new and steward existing places to be beautiful, popular and resilient. How do we approach this?

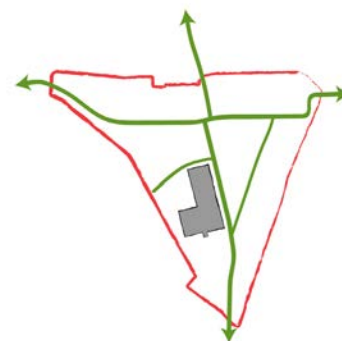
We always start by asking the people, 'engaging wide' using online platforms and 'engaging deep' through events, interviews and charettes. It's normally best to focus on simple but meaningful questions and to focus on place as well as movement. What is your favourite place? What is your least favourite? Which place would you improve and how?

Online mapping tools are great for identifying the patterns of local preference, and which local streets are the most loved. We also use imagery and precedents to help us discover preferences. Unsurprisingly, we usually find that the results are in line with our research. People prefer streets that are beautiful, green, human-scaled and feel like they 'fit.'

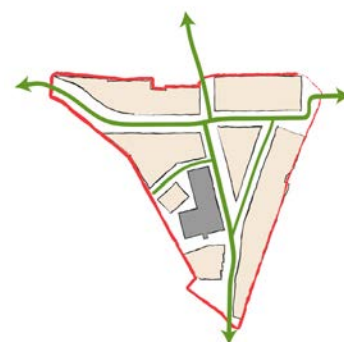
In our detailed street design work we recognise that cars do bring choice that people value. We typically don't "ban" cars but simply make them the secondary species to humans. In existing places, we seek gradualist "win-win" processes for improving places with the consent of local neighbourhoods. This can be done. Plant street trees. Create continuous crossings. Experiment with pedestrianising or part-pedestrianising streets on a given day. Very often, local shop income rises.

The joy of streets has been rediscovered after the disastrous evolutionary dead end of traffic-modernism. The path back to a happier and more resilient future will involve re-discovering the patterns which we should never have forgotten in the first place.

Define the streets



Define the blocks

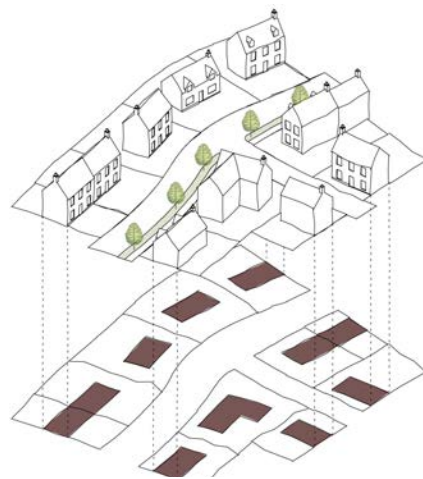


Distribute the plots

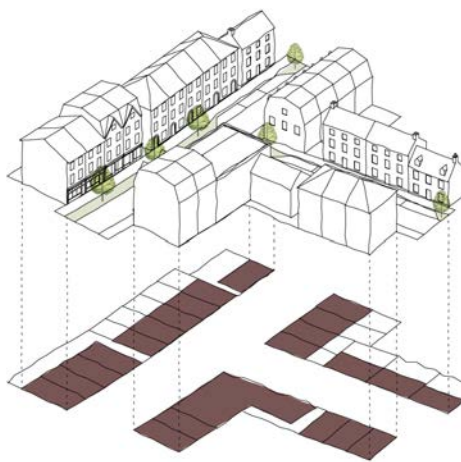




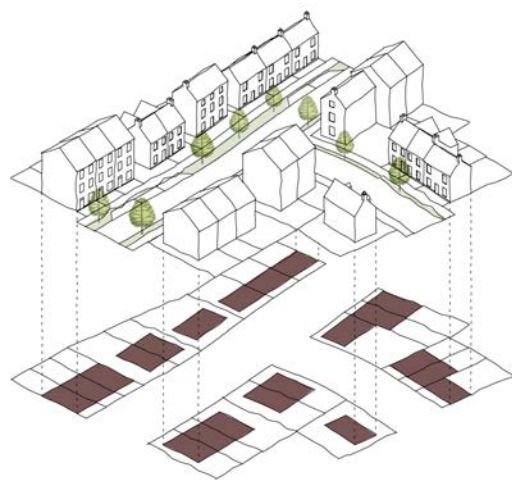
*Area types for a new development in
Wychavon, UK*



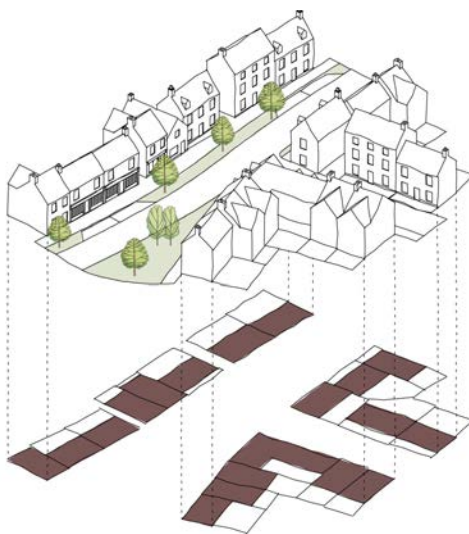
Rural



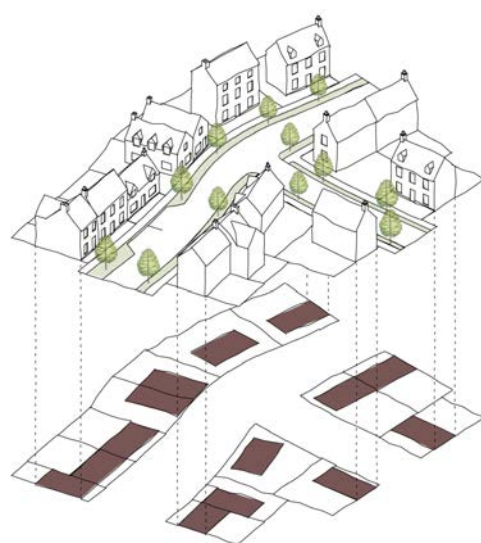
Town Centre



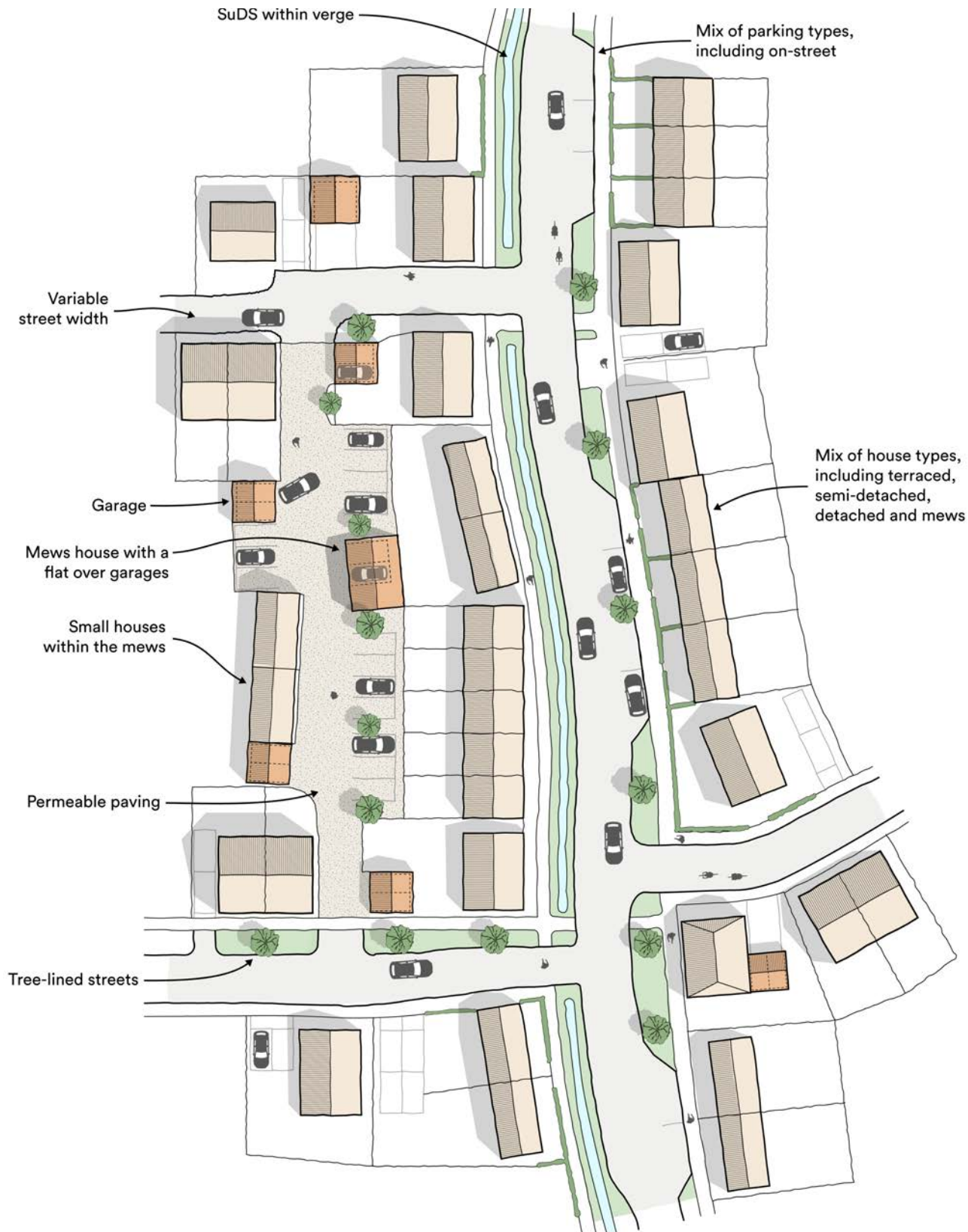
Suburbs



Local Centre



Village



Typical secondary street design in Wychavon, UK



GET IN TOUCH



www.createstreets.com